

Genealogies of Violence Reconsidered: Refusal, Devotional Economies, and the Continuum of the Female Body in Mahasweta Devi

Aritra Banerjee¹, Dr. Nibedita Paul²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of English, Techno India University, West Bengal, India.

Email: aritra.siempre@gmail.com

² Associate Professor, Department of English, Techno India University, West Bengal, India.

Email: nibedita.p@technoindiaeducation.com

Abstract

In this article I revisit four of Mahasweta Devi's short fictions, Talaq (Divorce), Manat (The Vow), Naitik (The Moral Choice) and Draupadi, one that has been the one thing that the scholarship has tended to bracket. So what do her women really do with the apparatuses which seek to administer them? There are two related groups of readings which dominate. In the trauma reading, the inscription of the patriarchy is registered on the body of the woman. In Spivak's reading, Dopdi's nudity is a moment of pure refusal, which is passed on to the heroic reading. Neither, I want to say, conveys the dialectical aspects of Devi's narration, its small attritional movements, in which sanction starts to come undone. With a continuum of sexual violence provided by Liz Kelly, a slow violence analysis offered by Rob Nixon and a Foucauldian approach to genealogy, I read these stories against the background of the post-Nirbhaya, post-R. G. Kar, conjectures and suggest that the spectacular case is most effectively understood as the visible end of a graduated economy of harm. The argument is based on the close reading of Kuli's rejection of the halala in Talaq, the devotional marketplace run by Chhone in Manat, the foreclosure of moral grammar in Naitik, and the disrobing in Draupadi. I think that the fiction written by Devi rather than diagnosing patriarchy, shows its constitutive precariousness.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi, female sovereignty, continuum of violence, devotional economy, subaltern feminism, postcolonial fiction.

I. The Problematic

In the current feminist debates in India, there is an interesting pendulum movement from shock to what can be considered as a 'structural amnesia'. The Delhi gang rape of December 2012, whose name the press adopted for the victim—"Nirbhaya"—followed a pattern, one that Indian media has traditionally kept when reporting on rape cases, that did not name their victims, and was immediately followed by a mass movement, unprecedented in the country's recent history. The assault on Abhaya was a similar explosion, but sent by the entirely different fears of professional exposedness and institutional failure. The attack on Abhaya at R. G. Kar Medical College and Hospital brought forth a similar outburst, but with the other, vastly different, insecurities of professional exposedness and institutional failure. Both were immediately given the designation "watershed". In both cases, there was a subsequent institutional or legislative reaction – the first to the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 2013 and the second to changes in safety procedures in medical colleges. One after another, grimly, each of them, Kathua, Unnao, Hathras, that we now know that incantation descends like a load of rain or snow.

So what does the watershed metaphor do? It guarantees a temporality of rupture, or a before and an after, or a transformation which is morally compelling. The record of fact denies the hope. Yet the metaphor does not go away, it does not go away, but rather proliferates, as if the fact of reiterating the watershed wasn't the diagnostic characteristic of the discourse. What's up with this here? The insistence that Nirbhaya was a watershed, Abhaya was a watershed, each new case is a case after which something must change is an affirmation of a temporality which is being challenged by these events. I'd like to suggest that this isn't a harmless misrecognition, but it's a valuable one. The metaphor of the watershed functions like structural forgetting, that is, keeping alive the potential for positive change as the ground under one's feet is moving beneath him or her.

The conceptual vocabulary is different in such a reading and it starts with Liz Kelly's continuum of sexual violence that was introduced in her 1988 study *Surviving Sexual Violence*. The intervention of Kelly was obviously polemical. She went looking to break down the criminological separation between the legal entity of rape and the everyday "feelings" of harassment, coercion and intimate compulsion that women lived their lives in. The continuum is not in ranking order. It's a field that's graduated. What appears to be a separate incident from the press conference, is really just the top of a distribution where the lower parts of the distribution show little or no violence at all. This concept of insight has proved to be rather substantial, and has been fruitfully developed by Cynthia Cockburn's work on militarisation and gender, and Joanne Conaghan's on the legal nature of rape. It's easy to see for now its significance. It provides the language that enables reading of Devi's fictions as a whole set of registers the conventional analytic would separate.

This article has been troubling me for a long time and I don't want to take that scholarship away as a whole. The 1987 reading of *Draupadi* by Spivak and the larger debate on Devi's subaltern advocacy, and her ethnographic engagement with Adivasi life has been a staple of literature (Sen and Yadav, 2008; Roy, 2012 are but a few). What is not yet fully understood, I think, in this singularly moving account of Devi's narration is the dialectical nature of her narration. These are not stories about women who are merely inscribed by patriarchal sanction or are anyone but figures of epiphanic refusal. They negotiate. They calculate. They blow out the apparatus from inside. They occupy, often, a position in which the very ritual / juridical mechanisms that are to be the basis of their subordination becomes, by their refusal to embody it, the means by which it is undone. The texture of the reading that I would like to create.

The following is divided into three claims. The first is that Devi's stories are genealogical in the sense that Foucault meant by this term in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History". They refer not to sources, but to their descendent: not to the time of the patriarchal violence, but to the various and many practices, religious, juridical, communal, and national, in which it is, in the historical process, sedimented. The second is that Lerner's work, on the historical construction of patriarchy, indispensable as it is, is complemented by that of the connection of Kelly, Nixon and Das. The third is most important for the close readings to come and that is the fact that the main characters of Devi's novels shed light on the constitutive fragility of the apparatuses in which they operate. They don't go beyond those apparatuses. They reveal the things that the apparatuses need, and what happens when they don't get them.

II. Theoretical Coordinates

Let's now briefly discuss the conceptual triad that "works" this article.

As I've already noted, Kelly's continuum is not willing to make the division between the catastrophic event and the normal texture of being a woman. The implication that is properly drawn is methodological. No one can read the marvelous rape without reading it at the same time, the ritualized call for endurance, the ultimatum of marriage, the innuendo in the work, the husband's pronouncement that ends a marriage. There

are no analogies here. They are distributed in a single distribution. The story of the Devi on this reading doesn't seem to be an allegory about a high-profile case. It's one of the continuum and acts at a lower level of intensity.

Slow violence, which was theorised by Nixon in his monograph, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, (2011), identifies another problem: the problem of harm that is spread out over time and place, harm that is not represented because of its lack of temporality. It is Nixon's concern with environmental violence in the Global South that is most easily rendered into the analytic, with unusual clarity. These forms of harm do not go viral; they do not fall into the news time frame; they do not conform to the news temporal logic and so they cannot be noticed by the news cycle. I shall suggest that reading Nixon with Dev's fiction in mind illuminates what is at stake and that it's a uniquely attuned understanding to this mode of the slower.

The third leg of this triumvirate is Das's *Life and Words* (2007), which is arguably the most important, especially since it is a film that is significantly less popular than the others. Das argues that violence is not primarily an occurrence that breaks apart the normal but instead one that is folded and lives on in the normal, that is, by becoming embedded in the ways lives are reconstructed. This argument is similar to my conception of the genealogical mode – call it that – that I'm calling *Devi's*. To evoke genealogy here is not to wave broadly towards Foucault, but to insist upon the specific methodological commitment that his usage entails: that violence is not monogenic but descendent — that violence has no inevitable end point: that the literary text is unique in the sense that it alone has the power to render visible this descent. The novel and the short story are not about the violence of the patriarchy. They reconstruct conditions for the thinkability.

III. Talaq (Divorce)

The familiar account of the practice of Talaq (Divorce) assigns Kulsum, Kuli in the familiar register the story chooses, the position of a juridical-religious precarity: always vulnerable to the subject's absolute declaration. The reading isn't totally incorrect. The story does indeed revolve around the speech act of triple talaq, and indeed the lack of symmetry of the dissolution of marriage under the form of customary law that is present in the text is real. However, to stop at that is to miss what *Devi* is doing – which is more challenging. She is preparing for when the patriarchal performative, that very thing which is supposed to cement the power of the man, starts to fall into itself.

Have a close look at what is happening in the scene that caused the event. Asgar says the words of talaq not because it is a cool act of religious prerogative but amidst a domestic argument for treatment of his grandson. Kuli, who has over three-and-a-half decades run the small economy of the household, refuses to take a back seat. She calls on her financial agency, "You have plenty, don't you?" and tells the child who is taking care of her that she has an epistemic claim on it; she refuses to let her husband's anger prevail on her. This denial is followed by the pronouncement. In this scene, though, Talaq is not the serenely practiced use of legitimate power. It's the humiliation of the male that is making its way toward the ritual device that is available. It can't help but bring to mind Austin's observation about the felicity conditions of the performative. The conditions of felicity are already corrupted when the word is spoken and *Devi's* prose style in her narration captures the corruption with quiet precision (*Devi* 55–60).

The next movement in the story, to my mind the most analytically significant, is one which the more conventional reading completely glosses over. When Asgar's words have their impact, when Kuli is transferred to a home away from the oppression of her younger sister Phuli, at Dhabdhabi, the patriarchal apparatus does not gel. Of course, it starts to petition for its own overturn. Asgar fasts. He weeps. He is threatening to eat Folidol. He sells all of his ducks, all of his chickens, his house and is ready to give away the world like a fakir. The elders of the community come to Phuli's house with a juridical-ritual remedy. After the wedding night Kuli is to be married to one Irfan Mondal of village, who will divorce her after which Asgar may marry her again. The halala is the usual means of evading the triple talaq, which is irrevocable. But here,

of course, the whole edifice of patriarchal sanction finds what it has been unable to know about itself, and to be able to go on without her consent.

This is not a lament of an internalised subject who is "uttering words of lamentation," but Kuli is saying "then go and die. It is the computed rejection by a lady equally capable of the asymmetry reading. It's the calculated rejection of a woman, just as well as a person who has read the asymmetry correctly. She at this moment is the most essential addition on which the whole ritual wheel turns. She refuses and the apparatus does not get destroyed. The village still exists, the religious format is still in existence, the elders leave, presumably with the understanding that they will gather again in a similar context. Her rejection reveals the fragile performative of the apparatus: that the performative of the patriarchal cannot withstand the end of the other without its consent. It's not melodrama when Asgar's next act is to show his head for a wager, train himself to be a fakir, give away his possessions to a neighbouring villager for five hundred rupees. These are the exact images of an apparatus stripped of its substance, its violence is reabsorbed by the man who uttered it, its essential precariousness.

I need to make it clear here that this reading is not saying what this reading means. It does not romanticise the talaq system — under which the husband has the right to unilaterally separate the couple — anywhere in the story, Devi does not do it. The point rather is that Devi rejects the schema of an imposed "sanction" because it is merely "woven" into a passive object of this sanction. She poses, on the contrary, the paradoxical fragility of this sanction, its reliance on a ritual mechanism which women can still refuse to function. It is, I suppose, a more probing and feminist critique than a reading of Kuli as a 'figure of conditional belonging' allows. It also possesses the virtue which one should not belittle in the present day and age in India of not succumbing to communalisation to which discussions on Muslim Personal Law are prone. In no real way is the story about Islam. In any system which gives the power unequal, it is about the structure of marital sovereignty which is recursive.

The implication deepens on the continuum, read against. Kuli's experience of triple talaq is nothing separate from the workplace harassment, the dowry harassment to which middle class bride is subjected, or the institutional negligence that led to the conditions which produced the R. G. Kar's case. All these are stepping-stones of a conditional logic of female autonomy. What Talaq plays out is when it is decided to take the measure of the structure, when the woman refuses to be obligated to it, when the gradient is broken.

IV. Manat (The Vow)

While Talaq illustrates the recursive process of juridical-religious sanction, Manat (The Vow) illustrates a more analytically complex scene as subaltern women's devotional practices are encapsulated by male intermediaries whose powers are themselves a washing down of previous criminal capital. The narrative has been interpreted as a fable of feminine piety and inwardness where it has been interpreted at all – the same inwardness that has been displaced by structural inequality and that has manifested itself in the discipline of fast and vow. Partial reading. It fails to provide an anatomy of the gendered economy of religious extraction, which is the most important aspect of the story.

Only the protagonist's name, as Anu's mother, is mentioned in the text and it is in a state of compounded precarity in a basti. Her husband Golak is dead, not heroically, but because he was too much of a drunk and gambler to have reached an 'early grave' that the community funded for him to be cremated. Her son Anu is very sick and they don't know what it is. Her job is as a domestic maid in middle class houses and this is the basis of the household economy. In this juncture, it is Sadamani, an older woman from basti, who suggests the manat – the silent pact with a folk goddess. The vow is given in the form of a personal pact between devotee and divine. Devi presents a number of challenges to the presentation right from the start, through the appearance of Chhone (Devi 97-107).

Chhone is a subject which requires reflection. He's been one of the enforcers of the local strongman Mona Roy, the blow of his left hand being disfigured the enemies of his patron, gambler's den, the den of the intoxication, he was. Mona Roy was killed - foolishly in a gang fight - by younger upstarts. According to the wonderfully dry word of the story chhone "turned over a new leaf. He grew his hair. He grew a beard & moustache. He bought himself a saffron tunic, saffron lungi and a rudraksh garland. He was the caretaker of the Shitala temple, and (this is important) even as he has been changed, he continues to eat "the tablet" and keeps his mind "in a truly transcendent state." On Chhone's part, the visiting police officer calls him "a yogi standing at my door. The word for 'a truly humane breeze of love and affection' has been used to describe the iron sacrificial block found at the temple; the former is now a replacement.

This isn't just a joke, it's ironical. The story is not frank in exposing the hypocrisy of the religious functionaries, in the common way. It is pointing out a mechanism by which the capital of the criminal is laundered in the devotional administration, and how the grief of women is made the raw material that is used in the laundering process. Chhone arrives first and Anu follows with 20 rupees, the offering that she has wriggled out of a middle class boudi's fingers, where Shitala, as the text puts it "the goddess of the savages and the barbarians". The boudi's devotion is limited to a transnationally broadcasted mahapurush who is delivering his discourses on America by video cassettes. The contrast doesn't just fall out of the sky. It creates a devotional market with a hierarchy, in which Anu's mother's pain is translated into economic value – first by Chhone who sets the conditions of the vow, then by the general cultural market, which labels her mode of devotion as 'caste/class deficient' and the boudi's as 'cosmopolitan'.

In this hierarchical setting, Chhone has an absolute control over the woman. He prescribes the conditions (a pair of goats, eight pieces of clothes, a puja for contentment, chest blood) and decides whether they are adequate or not, and whether they are effective or not. In a phenomenologically simple way the woman's devotion does not reach the divine. It is cleaned, priced and approved. And there the subtle parallelism that the story is subtly establishing becomes apparent. The same man who used to come in Anu's dead husband's dens is the same man who is in charge of extracting money from her mother. The same man is there who used to come in Anu's dead husband's dens and is now extracting money from her mother. But it is not two economies that produce Golak's saffron sanctity and his drunken negligence, and Chhone's masculinist economy. They are one. These two are part of the same network of extraction; the goddesses are the mediator between the two.

What Manat provides is something other than a parable of devotional interiority, it is a diagnosis of double subordination. The religiosity of the subaltern women groups is subjugated twice, once by the patriarchy in its own right, and the other by the class-caste stratification associated with "respectable" religion, which classifies some religions as "backward" while others are "modern". The Lerner model (suffering = sincerity) is not just incorrect, it is inadequate. It lacks the materialist substructure, which Devi has so carefully told. It's not just the woman's exhaustion, it's the political economy that needs the woman's exhaustion as its condition of operation, Nixon's sense of the slow violence at work in this story. When Anu's mother finally falls into the trance that she is in, and into which she eventually slips, when she feels that she "awakened the goddess" – at that moment the process of subaltern self-assertion and the process of depletion produced by the devotional economy converge. Devi does not or can't solve this paradox. But she insists otherwise, that it be registered.

V. Naitik is the author of The Moral Choice.

In the previous two readings, it was argued that the protagonists of Devi go beyond the schema of internalised subordination, and the schema of internalised subordination is a schema that is complicated in Naitik (The Moral Choice), in which the protagonist is restricted not because he or she lacks moral agency but because of the radical narrowing of the moral grammar within which she or he can speak. Talaq stages refusal. The

mediated entrapment by Manat was studied. Instead, Naitik plays another, perhaps more unsettling, scenario: the ethics of foreclosure, how the communal moral script frames what is even possible as a response to the coercion.

The analytical power of the story is based on its absence of evil. This community is not made up of cynical patriarchs who are exploiting an institution that they don't believe in. It consists of believers, of those who have become what they are reproducing: those who have been formed by the grammar they are reproducing. This is the feel of Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which he described in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977) as the "durable, transposable disposition" whereby conditions of structure become "second nature. The harshness of Naitik's communal apparatus is no harsher than the harshness of the malice, the malice that is the habituated certainty, the certainty that a woman's endurance is ennobling, the certainty that the honour of man is community property, the certainty that the woman's autonomy has to be digested into collective coherence.

Devi depicts the protagonist's interiorized reasoning about the violence that is inherent in this grammar in a tone that is especially restrained. She reasons. But she has no public speech in which to circulate her reasonings. Her morals override the scripted one is one thing she cannot get away from and she fails to present; and she is left to the judgment of the collective conscience that encases her. What Devi says here is what Das, based on ordinary language philosophy by Stanley Cavell, has called the problem of voice in the wake of violence: the failure to capture the experience of violence in the available language system, in the grammar. In the case of the woman of Naitik, she is not morally null. She has no audience that is able to accept it. The distinction matters. The woman who is disempowered may be empowered through education. The man who doesn't have an audience is the guy with a much more difficult issue.

The impact is rather topical and uneasy. The continuance of the victim blaming discourse after every big rape case involving a young Indian girl, doubts over mobility after Nirbhaya, the innuendo of slutty behaviour after Hathras, and the rumours of institutional failure after Abhaya are the work of the communal moral grammar in its mass mediated form. The vocabulary varies. The structural function does not: The woman is required to explain why she was "exposed to harm." The structures which give rise to the exposure are excused from questioning. This discursive mode is anticipated clearly by Naitik, and so its anticipation is all the more devastating that there is no villain identified. The antagonist of the story is said to be the grammar.

VI. Draupadi

The most explicit register of the article's argument is the imbibing of the female body and the militarised counterinsurgent apparatus of the postcolonial state, the story of 'Draupadi' being the most discussed of the article. Spivak's reading of the refusal of "clothing" in 1987, which puts Dopdi Mejhen's refusal in the context of the objectification of the rape, is fundamental. Acknowledging that intervention is impossible, and would be undesirable, to write about Draupadi without it. I'm going to suggest a calibration. I don't think refusal alone is an adequate trope for the inversion, which is done by the person who is dancing. It, in turn, is the revelation of the state's inherent dysfunctionality as a representational mechanism, which has since been built on by post-Naxalite feminist scholarship (Xaxa, 2014) and a materialist feminist approach to the Naxalite woman (Roy, 2012).

The body will serve as evidence, says Senior Advocate for Prosecution of Counterinsurgent Operation Senanayak, who expects it to be delivered to him once the captured Dopdi is produced. A body marked. Broken. Converted into a decipherable form of mastery of the State. This is no by-product of statist reasoning. It forms its substance. The state is the knowledge that it knows through the bodies to whose bodies it attaches its sovereignty; the genre in which it is rehearsed is the spectacle of violation. What Dopdi does, standing without clothes, without being put on; walking towards Senanayak, is not the heroic transcendence of trauma.

It's the intentional banishment of what is representable in the body. The body is here, it cannot be done without. The translation into statist semiotic, which has been refused, is what is being sought. The refusal is what is being sought in the translation into statist semiotic. The line is the exact diagnosis, and Senanayak is scared to face an unarmed target. The state's armament has always been bound up in its representative self-confidence. After that, the apparatus is disarmed.

The genealogic argument in the present article now takes shape. The continuity is not the same violence in the four stories. It is continuity of the recursive structures. The patriarchal performative is based on the woman's compliance and is only successful if she is willing to follow the directions. Her grief is the basis for the devotional economy to make money. Her articulability is the key to the communally coherent grammar. The statist show has to be based on her shame. In both instances, the apparatus is determined by a necessary stance on the part of the woman. Devi's explanation in each example refers to the time when that seat is left empty. The vacation doesn't get rid of the apparatus. Asgar's village remains. Chhone's temple remains. The community remains. The state remains. Exposed, on the other hand, is the contingency of the apparatus. I would say this is the right register of Devi's politics, not the romance of resistance but the materialist tracking of the ways that the necessities of power can be unhooked from the bodies that it normally relies on.

The need for the insight is as urgent as it is today and does not require much emphasis. This R. G. Kar case was a clear demonstration of failure of one of the most symbolically important institutions of secular modernity, the public hospital, to ensure the safety of the female professional who works for it. The idea that education and the awarding of credentials would protect women from the structural precarity of the Adivasi in the rural area or the subaltern in the urban area was found to be mythical, part of an ideological discourse that middle-class Indians hold. This expectation had already been referred to as a misrecognition in the stories that Devi wrote in the last few decades of the 20th century. The negation of the structural is not the institutional space. It's its modernisation.

VII. The Conjuncture and the Continuum

Reading these stories together – in the order I've suggested – in the post-2012 Indian conjuncture? It implies first, that the watershed must be forsaken for the comfort of it. The figure suggests a sense of time of breaking through. The chronological order of genders' violence in India doesn't respect that temporality. It is wrong to say that Nirbhaya was a watershed because it wasn't, Abhaya was a watershed because it wasn't, every subsequent case is the case after which something should happen because it is not. The events are systematically tearing apart the notion that Nirbhaya was a watershed, Abhaya was a watershed, every new case is the one beyond which something should happen. It is not a contingent feature of the discourse that the recurrence of the watershed takes place. It's its diagnostic characteristic.

All three converge in a single methodological injunction: read the spectacular and the structural as moments in a single, graduated economy of harm, as Kelly, Nixon, and Das propose. Devi's fiction is exemplary in just this aspect. The domestic quarrel and the counterinsurgent torture are not events ontologically different from each other, as far as Talaq is concerned. As for Talaq, the domestic quarrel and the counterinsurgent torture are not ontologically different. They are variations on a theme that shares a vulnerability distribution system and yet each variation is intensified in different ways: along axes of gender, caste, class, indigeneity and professional status. There is no uniformity to the apparatus. It is expressed in Stuart Hall's terms as historically contingent connections, which can only be made visible in the literary text.

To read this argument as a "counsel of despair" would be a mistake. It is not a mode of resignation, when properly understood, the genealogical mode. It is important to trace the sedimented conditions of contemporary violence to expose to its possibility of contestation the practices, dispositions and grammars that sustain it. The protagonists of Devi don't just take the apparatus, as I have been wanting you to read the

text as. They exhaust it. They refuse it. They're not interested in running it. They turn it into a disarmed version. It's not the fact that the apparatus is unbeatable. What is that the apparatus is material, it is that what is material can be materially decomposed.

There's also the issue of the purposes of literature in our time. Language of legal reform, institutional protocol and policy intervention are essential but not enough. They are unable to stand alone to challenge the grammars in which female endurance is naturalised, female autonomy made conditional, and female harm makes sense only at the point of becoming an event. There are languages that can do this, but not what is patiently traced in the slow, cumulative, dialectical movements of Devi's fiction, and not what can be made strange again, the ordinary. Reading her stories today, in the wake of Nirbhaya and Abhaya, is an invitation to consciousness which is not possible to be found in the news cycle, nor could it be created with policy alone. It's to be summoned, at the end of the day, to genealogy, to an understanding that which has been built, can be built up again, with enough labour, enough time.

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